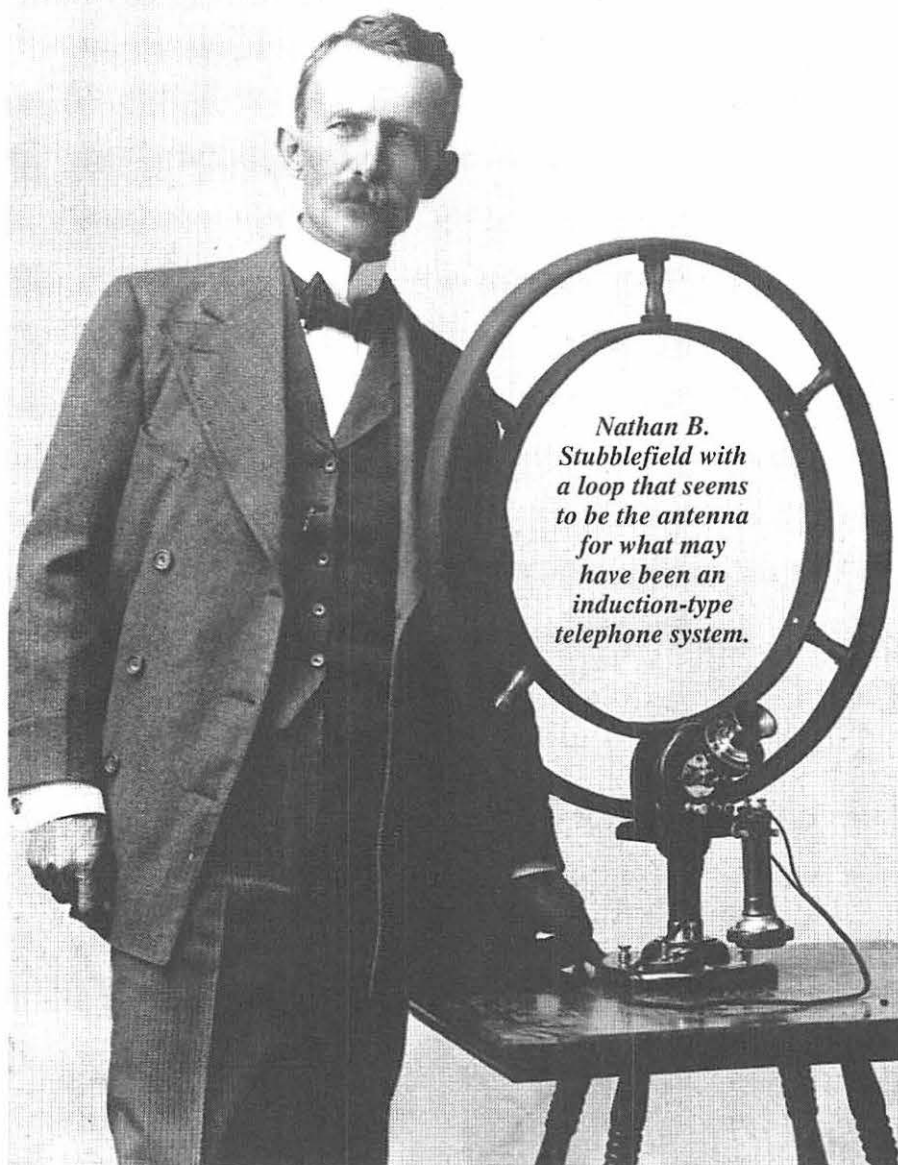


# Okay, Class, The Inventor of Radio Was ...



☐ Marconi?

☐ Poppov?

*or would you  
believe ...*

**By Leon Fletcher**

All Photos Courtesy of Pogue Library Archives,  
Murray State University

**Y**ou may think that Marconi invented radio, but don't try to tell that to folks in Murray, Kentucky.

There, on the campus of Murray State University, is a memorial naming Nathan B. Stubblefield as the actual inventor of radio. In front of Stubblefield's home and on the side of the state highway through town there are additional monuments honoring him for inventing radio. The first broadcast station in Murray is still operating with its original call, WNBS—letters selected to memorialize Stubblefield. On April 29, 1991, Kentucky Governor Wallace G. Wilkinson issued a proclamation stating that "...Stubblefield is the true inventor of radio and should be so recognized internationally as such..."

Murray radio talk show host Joe Pat Jones told me recently, "Most of the people here in Murray think Stubblefield was a genius and that he was the first to broadcast voice without wires."

☐ Nathan B. Stubblefield?

But outside of Murray, Stubblefield is remembered by few radio enthusiasts, hams, historians, or anyone else. "He is completely ignored in most books covering the history of radio," according to the official journal of the Antique Wireless Association.

## ■ A True Eccentric

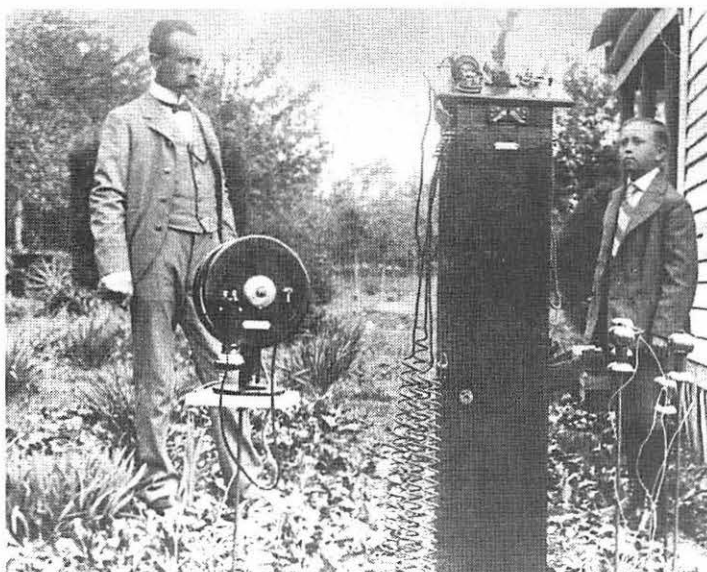
Stubblefield's life was filled with many strange conflicts, confusions, and contradictions—actually, from the day he was born to the day he died.

He was born near Murray in 1860. Or in 1859—depending on which reference you want to believe. His birthdate was either November 22 or December 27; again, researchers disagree.

Folks don't even agree about that "B" in the middle of Nathan B. Stubblefield's name. Some say it stood for Beverly, others say it's for Bedord, and still others claim it was for Bowman, his mother's maiden name.

Whatever his middle name, residents of Murray certainly thought he was eccentric. Nathan's sister, Aline, said he was a "moody genius." His schoolmates considered him an "odd ball." His grammar school teachers rated him a poor student. When he was just 15 years old, he quit school.

But he was studious. As a youngster, he spent much of his time studying all the science books he could find. He was intrigued with electricity, telephone, and telegraph. His



*Two pieces of his communications gear displayed by Stubblefield and his son Bernard. Note the rods sticking in the ground in the right foreground.*

cousin had a drug store with a magazine rack, and from it Nathan "borrowed" current editions of magazines such as *Scientific American* and *Electrical World*, trying to expand his knowledge. He often hung out at the offices of the local newspaper, *The Calloway Times*, searching for reports about what would become "electronics."

Stubblefield made his living as a farmer. One account claims he was "especially renowned for the quality of his orchard fruit and melons." Another source states he "spent some time farming but mostly (he was) reading"—mainly about developments in exchanging messages without wires. A third account says he spent as little time as he could raising vegetables and selling them to support his family.

He married a nearby resident, Ada May

Buchanan, when he was 21 years old. Another curious report: The *Kentucky Encyclopedia* states, "Though (they had) ten children, Nathan and Ada Kay were not a close couple."

Apparently they argued frequently. They separated several times. Soon after their youngest child left home, Ada May moved out and settled in relatively far-off Arkansas.

## ■ His Career Begins

In 1885, when he was 25 years old, Stubblefield successfully transmitted the human voice over what he called a "Vibrating Telephone." It was patented three years later, in 1888.

Marconi's patent was granted in 1896.

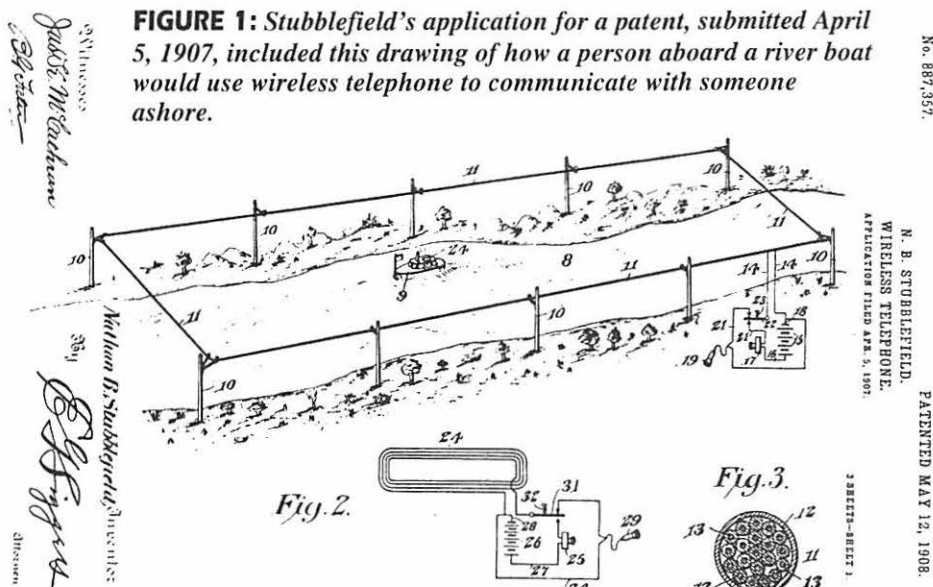
Stubblefield waited until 1892 to present what was apparently his first public demonstration of transmitting voice without wires. One observer was Dr. Rainey Wells, an attorney, politician, educator, and founder of Murray State University—a more reliable witness would be hard to find. Wells wrote:

"One day he invited me out to his farm for a demonstration of some kind of wireless outfit... He had a shack about four feet square near his house from which he took an ordinary telephone receiver such as we have today, but entirely without wires. Handing me these (sic), he asked me to walk some distance away and listen."

Dr. Wells walked into an adjacent apple orchard, beyond the range of hearing Stubblefield's voice directly.

"I heard 'Hello, Rainey' come booming out of the device. I jumped a foot and said to myself, 'This fellow is fooling me. He has

**FIGURE 1:** Stubblefield's application for a patent, submitted April 5, 1907, included this drawing of how a person aboard a river boat would use wireless telephone to communicate with someone ashore.

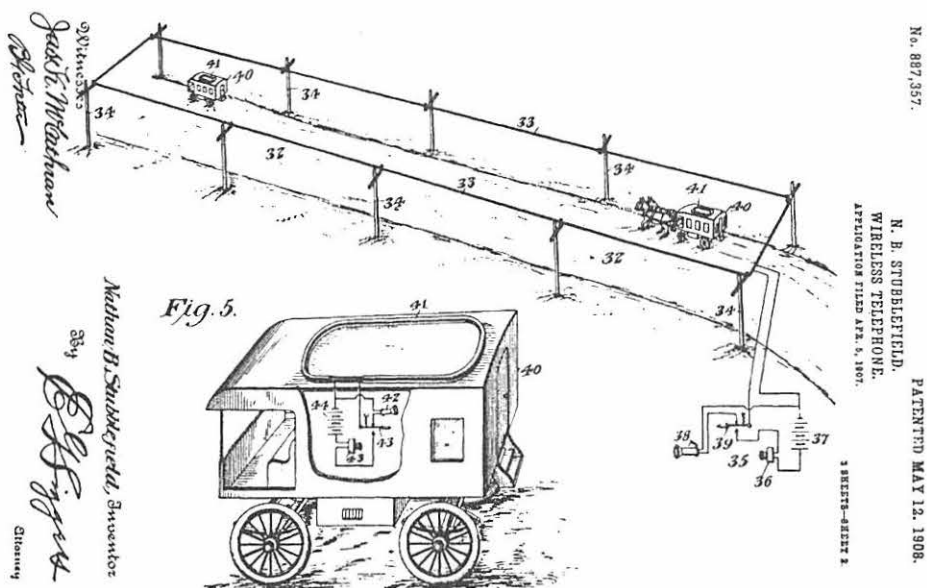


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**FIGURE 2:** Showing how wireless telephone could be used by someone in a railroad car, this drawing was another in Stubblefield's application for a patent; it was granted on May 12, 1908.

wires someplace." I moved a few feet to the side but all the while Stubblefield kept talking to me...but there were no wires, I tell you."

Stubblefield was a very suspicious fellow. His son Bernard was the only person allowed to see all of his experiments. He wired the area around his home so bells rang whenever anyone came within a half-mile. He waited, sometimes for years, to obtain copyrights on his inventions, apparently afraid they'd still be stolen. He delayed public presentations of his innovations.

Finally, on January 1, 1902, Stubblefield staged a giant demonstration to bring to the attention of the American public his wireless communications. Some 1,000 people attended. A reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote:

"I placed the receiver to my ear and listened. Presently there came with extraordinary distinctness several spasmodic buzzings and then a voice which said, 'Hello, can you hear me?'"

That story created national interest. Two months later, on March 20, 1902, Stubblefield was in Washington, D.C. to present another demonstration. From the steamer *Hartholdi* in the Potomac River, Stubblefield sent wireless messages to receivers ashore. There, several congressmen and public officials heard the messages. The *Washington Times* and other newspapers reported the event.

Triumphantly, Stubblefield returned to his home in Murray and presented another demonstration. Written invitations were sent. Still, Stubblefield was a proud farmer: in his adjacent orchard, apples were "tied upon the trees so they would show up in the pictures," one guest reported.

Stubblefield was on a roll—briefly. He was offered \$40,000 for his invention; he turned it down. Later he was offered \$500,000, but he rejected that, too. Instead, he accepted stock in a company incorporated in distant and tiny Prescott, Arizona, the Wireless Telephone Company of America. Its prospectus claimed it had "been organized with a capitalization of \$5,000,000. But the outfit sold only one of Stubblefield's systems, to the Gordon Telephone Company of Charleston, South Carolina, which wanted to communicate with its offshore islands.

Stubblefield had been taken. The company was a hoax, formed to sell stock, not telephones. And Stubblefield had lost the rights to his own invention.

He went back to work in his shop, to refine his apparatus and then prove to the U.S. Patent Office that his new equipment was unique.

In 1907 he began a new project—Telephonelgreen, a home school. It offered the standard "Three R's"—and added "Three E's": Etiquette, Easop's (sic) Fables, and Ethics. Other subjects included fruit growing, and technical courses in magnetism, telegraph, telephony, and such.

### ■ The Start of His End

Four years later, Stubblefield was broke. Local businessmen, who'd already lost their investments in two of his projects, were reluctant to finance him again. Creditors seized his home and farm. In 1913, his house burned; all of his equipment was destroyed. Still, he wrote to a relative, "... my ambition is not gone."

He moved out of town, into the country. His living conditions were primitive: he built

a house between four trees, used cornstalks and mud for walls, dirt for the floor, tin for the roof. Friends and relatives left food at his door. He was a hermit.

Still he continued to conduct experiments, often scrounging for parts. Neighbors saw strange lights and heard weird sounds coming from his shack.

In mid-March, 1928, he told a friend, Obid Daniel, that he was feeling weak. "If you don't see smoke from my fire for a day or so you'd might come and knock at my door."

A few days later, Daniel noticed there was no smoke coming from Stubblefield's chimney. Daniel went to the shack, looked in, saw Stubblefield spread out on the dirt floor, dead.

Today, one of the few researchers who continues to search for information about Stubblefield is Dr. Robert Henry Lochte, Assistant Professor of Journalism, Murray State University. In gathering material for this article, I talked with him—a staunch believer that Stubblefield was the first to invent radio. Launche has written extensively about the strange inventor and summarizes his findings into four "schools of thought:"

1. Stubblefield's "discoveries are inconsequential and can be ignored."
2. "He did invent a wireless telephone, but used conduction and/or induction rather than the electromagnetic waves now called radio frequencies."
3. "...Stubblefield transmitted voice and music first. Any argument to the contrary is an exercise in semantics."
4. "... (he) was a talented and diligent inventor who lacked the business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit to develop the commercial potential of his discoveries."

That last view, says Dr. Lochte, "seems to be the proper perspective."

After Nathan B. Stubblefield died at age 68, on March 28, 1928, collapsing from starvation, alone except for his cat, there was even then one more odd incident added to his biography. County corner Horace Churchill wrote in his report of the death that Stubblefield's "cat had licked out his entire eyeball sockets."

(Happy Halloween!)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Leon Fletcher, an extra class amateur radio operator (call: AA6ZG), is a fulltime writer and Emeritus Professor of Speech, Monterey Peninsula College. His publications include 12 books and more than 500 articles.